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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

Common Errors and How to Fix Them

The Chief Reader pitfalls checklist from the 2023-2025 AP Lang Chief Reader Reports, expanded into before-and-after examples, plus the grammar and punctuation problems that cost clarity. Use it after you draft a timed essay: scan for each error type, mark the ones you made, and rewrite one sentence per error using the "after" models.

How This Document Is Organized

Each error has the same shape: **what it is**, **why readers penalize it**, a **before** (weak) example, an **after** (fixed) example, and a **quick fix** you can apply in under a minute. Examples are original; hypothetical passages are described rather than quoted unless otherwise noted.

Reminder from the Course and Exam Description: errors "typical of unrevised, timed writing" do not lower scores unless they are so prevalent that they interfere with communication. Mechanics errors that interfere with communication, however, block the fourth point in Row B. Part 3 covers those.

The Checklist at a Glance

#	ERROR	RUBRIC ROW IT HURTS	ONE-LINE FIX
1	Summary disguised as analysis	Row B	Add what the choice <i>does</i> and <i>why</i>
2	"This shows that..." commentary	Row B	State what it shows <i>for the argument</i>
3	Listing devices; naming appeals as the choice	Rows A, B	Describe the choice, then the effect
4	Claiming a device the text does not contain	Row B	Quote it; if you cannot, drop it
5	Thesis that restates the prompt	Row A	Name choices and purpose, or take a position
6	Vague or equivocating thesis	Row A	Make it defensible and specific

#	ERROR	RUBRIC ROW IT HURTS	ONE-LINE FIX
7	Ignoring part of the prompt	Rows A, B	Reread the qualifier words
8	Source-by-source or device-by-device organization	Row B	Build a line of reasoning
9	Source dumping and "Source A says..."	Row B	Put sources in conversation
10	Sweeping generalizations as context	Row C	Cite specific context tied to the argument
11	Token counterarguments	Row C	Handle opposition inside the reasoning
12	Speech-writing errors	Rows A, B	Name the speaker, occasion, and listeners
13	Unqualified claims	Row A, B	Add scope
14	Undefined key term (FRQ 3)	Rows A, B	Define it first
15	Personal examples without relevance	Row B	Link the example to the abstract question
16	Uneven pacing and tone problems	Row B	Plan paragraph lengths; keep register formal
17	Mechanics that interfere with meaning	Row B (4th point)	Fix the sentence-level problem

Part 1: Reasoning and Analysis Errors

Error 1: Summary disguised as analysis

What it is. Retelling what the passage says instead of explaining how the writer's choices work.

Why it costs points. Row B 1 is defined as commentary that "summarizes rather than explains." The 2012 Chief Reader's weakest tier was "merely explaining what Kennedy said."

Before. "In the second paragraph, Albright talks about the graduates leaving school and going into the world. She says that they have a lot ahead of them and will face challenges."

After. "In the second paragraph, Albright casts the graduates' departure as an inheritance, not an exit: by naming the challenges 'left unfinished,' she converts a celebratory moment into a handoff, preparing them to hear her later charge as a duty."

Quick fix. After every sentence ask, *What is the writer doing here, and why would this audience need it?* If the sentence answers neither, it is summary.

Error 2: "This shows that..." and the quote-then-paraphrase habit

What it is. A quotation followed by a restatement of the same idea in different words.

Why it costs points. The 2023 and 2024 reports flag this as the recurring commentary failure. The remedy recommended in 2024: a three-column check (quote / summary / explanation), where the third column must say something the first two do not.

Before. "Kelley writes that children work 'all night long.' This shows that children work at night."

After. "Kelley's phrase 'all night long' removes the boundary between work and sleep. By making the night itself a workplace, she gives her listeners a reason to see child labor not as a daytime hardship but as a theft of rest, which is why her call to vote lands as a rescue."

Quick fix. Replace "This shows that" with a question: *so what?* Keep answering until the answer is the thesis.

Alternative starters to avoid the trap:

INSTEAD OF	TRY
"This shows that..."	"This makes the audience..."
"This means that..."	"By choosing this word, the writer..."
"This proves that..."	"This positions listeners to..."
"This is important because it is important."	"This matters to the argument because..."

Error 3: Listing devices and naming appeals as the choice

What it is. Strings of labels ("anaphora, metaphor, ethos, pathos") without function, or opening sentences like "The speaker uses ethos, pathos, and logos."

Why it costs points. The 2023 report states that "devices are not choices" and that labeling ethos, pathos, or a "call to action" as the choice, instead of as the effect of a concrete choice (an anecdote, a comparison), is a flaw. The 2012 Chief Reader gave the example "President Kennedy used anaphora, emotion, and slippery slope to achieve his purpose."

Before. "Obama uses anaphora, pathos, and a metaphor to appeal to his audience."

After. "Obama repeats 'because of her' at the start of successive sentences, crediting Rosa Parks with a chain of changes; the repetition makes her single act feel enormous, and the audience is invited to see their own freedoms as downstream of it."

Quick fix. Write the sentence in three clauses: *Choice (quoted) + effect on audience + purpose.*

Error 4: Claiming a device the text does not contain

What it is. Calling a sentence "asyndeton" when it uses conjunctions, or "parallelism" when the structures do not match, or citing an "analogy" that is actually a simple example.

Why it costs points. The 2023 report notes that unsupported syntax claims hurt credibility; MCQ distractors often name a device that the cited lines do not contain.

Before. "Gandhi uses polysyndeton in his letter to emphasize his point."

After (if the text has it). "Gandhi strings three clauses with 'and' ('and I ask ... and I warn ... and I appeal'), slowing the sentence so each demand lands separately."

After (if the text does not). "Gandhi addresses the Viceroy as 'Dear Friend,' a phrase that softens the confrontation to come."

Quick fix. Quote the evidence for the device in the same sentence. If you cannot, choose a different choice to analyze.

Error 5: Ignoring part of the prompt

What it is. Answering a general topic when the prompt narrows it (the 2024 synthesis asked about *laws* protecting historic buildings; some students argued for preservation in general).

Before (prompt: "the value, if any, of laws protecting historically important buildings"). "Preserving old buildings is important because they connect us to our past."

After. "Laws that protect historic buildings are valuable chiefly because they slow demolitions long enough for communities to weigh what would be lost, though they also impose real costs on owners."

Quick fix. Underline the prompt's verbs and qualifiers. Copy the most specific phrase into the margin and answer it.

Error 6: Organization that lists instead of builds

What it is. Paragraphs that could be reordered without changing the essay: source-by-source in FRQ 1, device-by-device in FRQ 2, example-by-example in FRQ 3.

Why it costs points. The most-cited discriminator in the Chief Reader Reports is a **line of reasoning**. Essays that make "two or three claims, each tied to one source" stall at Row B 2.

Before (topic sentences). - "Source A says naps help." - "Source C also says naps help." - "Source E says naps help too."

After. - "The strongest case for napping begins with safety, where Source A's data on error rates ties rest to lives." - "That safety argument becomes an economic one in Source C, which shows that fewer errors reduce costs." - "Yet the economic case has limits: Source E warns that naps work only when scheduled, which turns a personal habit into a policy question."

Quick fix. Read only your topic sentences. Each one should depend on the one before it.

Error 7: Source dumping and the additive "Source A says..." chain

What it is. Treating each source as a separate summary.

Why it costs points. The 2012 Chief Reader preferred writers who "put [sources] in conversation with one another." The 2023-2025 reports penalize vague bundling ("as seen in Sources B, C, and E").

Before. "Source A says napping helps memory. Source B says it hurts night sleep. Source C says it varies."

After. "Source A's data on memory gains appears to settle the question until Source B qualifies it: the gains are real, but they come at a cost to night sleep, a tradeoff Source C resolves by tying the length of the nap to the benefit."

Quick fix. Use the frame “While Source A emphasizes , **Source B reveals** .” Put at least two sources in each body paragraph.

Part 2: Thesis, Claim, and Context Errors

Error 8: A thesis that restates the prompt

What it is. Repeating the task in declarative form.

Before (FRQ 2). “Michelle Obama uses rhetorical choices to convey her message to young people.”

After. “Michelle Obama opens with her own early doubts and moves to a direct charge to the students, using shared vulnerability to earn the authority to demand their best.”

Before (FRQ 3). “Jemison’s claim is valid to some extent.”

After. “Jemison’s claim is valid when ‘limited imagination’ means refusing to test an idea, but invalid when it dismisses evidence-based caution.”

Quick fix. Add a *because*, a concrete choice, or a condition.

Error 9: A vague or equivocating thesis

What it is. “There are many sides,” or two sentences that never settle on a position.

Before. “Napping has both benefits and drawbacks, and it depends on the person.”

After. “Because the safety benefits are greatest for shift workers, workplaces that rely on night labor should protect short naps even if office jobs do not.”

Quick fix. Choose a side, then qualify its scope. *Hedge the scope, not the stance.*

Error 10: Unqualified claims and sweeping absolutes

What it is. “Always,” “never,” “everyone,” “all,” “proves.”

Why it costs points. CED 3.C and 4.C emphasize qualifying claims through modifiers, counterarguments, and alternative perspectives. Absolutes are also a standard MCQ distractor tell.

Before. “Technology always makes students lazy.”

After. “When devices replace practice rather than extend it, technology can erode the habits that learning requires.”

Quick fix. Circle every absolute; replace with a qualifier or a condition.

Error 11: Sweeping generalizations as “context”

What it is. Opening with claims like “Throughout history, people have struggled with injustice.”

Why it costs points. The rubric says sophistication is not earned by “contextualization of mostly sweeping generalizations.”

Before. “In today’s society, people face many pressures, and speakers must address them.”

After. "In 1905, when no federal law limited the work hours of children, Florence Kelley spoke to an audience of women who could not yet vote on the laws she wanted."

Quick fix. Replace every "society," "throughout history," and "today's world" with a date, place, group, or event.

Error 12: Token counterarguments

What it is. A one-sentence "Some may disagree..." that is never answered, or a formulaic counterargument paragraph at the end.

Why it costs points. The 2025 Chief Reader discourages binary framing and formulaic counterargument paragraphs; token objections dismissed in one sentence do not earn sophistication.

Before. "Some people disagree, but they are wrong because they do not understand."

After. "The strongest objection is that outside criticism sometimes saves people from error; the claim survives that objection only if 'limited imagination' is read narrowly, as a failure to consider evidence, not as any warning at all."

Quick fix. Put the objection inside a body paragraph and let it change your claim.

Error 13: Undefined key terms (FRQ 3)

What it is. Arguing about "bravery," "perfection," "being present," or "optimism" without saying what the word means.

Why it costs points. The 2025 report: theses like "Living in the moment is extremely valid" are undeveloped; high scorers define abstract terms first.

Before. "Perfection is good because it makes people try harder."

After. "By perfection I mean the pursuit of flawlessness, not the achievement of it; this distinction matters because the pursuit can sharpen skill while the demand can paralyze it."

Quick fix. After the claim, add a sentence: "By ___ I mean , *not* ."

Error 14: Personal examples without relevance to the abstract question

What it is. A story that sounds interesting but never connects to the claim.

Why it costs points. The 2024 report: students rarely lack examples; they fail to explain relevance to the abstract question.

Before. "When I joined the swim team, I was nervous, but I kept practicing and eventually made the finals. This shows perseverance."

After. "When I joined the swim team nervous and slow, practice did not feel like courage; it felt like repetition. Yet by the finals I had built a habit that fear could not interrupt, which suggests that bravery is often a matter of routine more than impulse."

Quick fix. After each example, write: "This is relevant to [claim] because it shows ___."

Error 15: Conflating adjacent concepts

What it is. Treating related ideas as identical (photo albums and selfies, privacy and secrecy, patience and passivity).

Before. "Selfies are just like photo albums, so they are valuable."

After. "Selfies resemble photo albums in recording a life, but they differ in audience: an album is kept for oneself or family, while a selfie is often posted for strangers, which changes what it is meant to do."

Quick fix. Write one sentence naming the *difference* between the two ideas before using them interchangeably.

Part 3: Rhetorical Situation and Style Errors

Error 16: Speech-writing errors

What they are. Analyzing a speech as if it were an essay: writing "the author" for a speaker, "readers" for listeners, ignoring the occasion, misidentifying the audience, or analyzing paragraph layout instead of spoken effect.

Why it costs points. FRQ 2 requires "an understanding of the rhetorical situation." The Chief Reader Reports list speech-writing errors among the top pitfalls.

Before. "The author uses a long paragraph to explain to readers why the topic matters."

After. "The speaker, addressing graduates seated in the sun, uses short, repeated phrases that a listening audience can hold in memory while she moves toward her point."

Checklist for speech essays.

DO	DON'T
"The speaker," or the name	"The author"
"Listeners," "the audience," "graduates"	"Readers"
Mention occasion and date	Ignore the setting
Note repetition, pause, and rhythm as spoken devices	Treat the text as page design
Name secondary audiences (reporters, the public)	Assume only the room matters

Error 17: Pacing problems and uneven development

What it is. One long paragraph followed by two thin ones; a lopsided essay; spending twenty minutes on the introduction.

Fix with a budget. Use fixed timing per essay: synthesis about 15 reading + 5 planning + 35 writing; rhetorical analysis about 8 reading + 2 planning + 30 writing; argument about 5 reading + 5 planning + 30 writing. Three solid body paragraphs outperform four thin ones. If you must cut, cut the conclusion, never the thesis.

Error 18: Tone and register slips

What it is. Casual language, overuse of rhetorical questions, "I think," slang, or repetitive "agree/disagree" diction (flagged in 2024).

Before. "Honestly, I think this speech is kind of amazing because it's super emotional."

After. "The speech draws its force from restraint: the speaker states her loss plainly and lets the audience supply the grief."

Quick fix. Replace *very, really, kind of, super, a lot, thing, stuff, society, relatable* with a precise word or cut the phrase.

Error 19: Overusing rhetorical questions and filler

Before. "What does Gandhi want? He wants fairness. Why does he want fairness? Because fairness is important."

After. "Gandhi frames his demand for fairness as a shared principle, not a favor, in order to deny the Viceroy any dignified way to refuse."

Quick fix. Delete any rhetorical question in your own prose unless it does analytical work.

Error 20: Vague audience references

Before. "The speaker appeals to the audience."

After. "The speaker appeals to a gymnasium of anxious seventeen-year-olds by naming the fears they would not say aloud."

Quick fix. Replace "the audience" with *who*, in the specific situation.

Error 21: Ornate or inflated vocabulary

Why it costs points. The rubric does not reward ornate language that does not enhance the argument. Precision beats grandeur.

Before. "The speaker's magnificently elucidated rhetorical architecture adumbrates her inexorable teleology."

After. "The speaker moves step by step from a story to a claim to a request."

Part 4: Grammar and Punctuation That Cost Clarity

The CED stresses that grammar errors typical of unrevised timed writing do not lower scores unless they interfere with communication. These are the ones most likely to interfere.

4.1 Comma splices and run-ons

Problem. Two independent clauses joined by a comma alone, or no punctuation.

Before. "Kelley describes the mills, she wants her audience to feel responsible."

Fixes (four ways).

FIX	AFTER
Period	"Kelley describes the mills. She wants her audience to feel responsible."
Comma + coordinator	"Kelley describes the mills, and she wants her audience to feel responsible."

FIX	AFTER
Semicolon	"Kelley describes the mills; she wants her audience to feel responsible."
Subordinator	"Because she wants her audience to feel responsible, Kelley describes the mills."

4.2 Fragments

Before. "Because the speaker uses repetition to build emphasis."

After. "The speaker uses repetition to build emphasis." Or: "Because the speaker uses repetition, the audience hears the demand as a refrain."

4.3 Subject-verb agreement

Before. "The list of demands are long."

After. "The list of demands is long." (The subject is *list*.)

4.4 Pronoun reference

Before. "The speaker told the senator she was wrong." (Who?)

After. "The speaker told the senator, 'You are wrong.'" Or: "The speaker said that the senator was wrong."

4.5 Modifier placement

Before. "Hoping to persuade the audience, the evidence was presented carefully." (The evidence is not hoping.)

After. "Hoping to persuade the audience, the speaker presented the evidence carefully."

4.6 Parallel structure

Before. "The speaker aims to inform, persuading, and to inspire."

After. "The speaker aims to inform, to persuade, and to inspire."

4.7 Apostrophes and possessives

ERROR	FIX
"The speakers words"	"The speaker's words"
"The audiences' reaction" (one audience)	"The audience's reaction"
"Its a strong claim."	"It's a strong claim."
"The speech lost it's force."	"The speech lost its force."

4.8 Commonly confused words

PAIR	MEANING
affect / effect	<i>affect</i> (verb) to influence; <i>effect</i> (noun) a result
accept / except	<i>accept</i> receive; <i>except</i> exclude
than / then	<i>than</i> comparison; <i>then</i> time
their / there / they're	possession / place / they are
whose / who's	possession / who is
principle / principal	rule / chief
imply / infer	the writer implies; the reader infers
complement / compliment	completes / praises
fewer / less	countable / uncountable

4.9 Colons, semicolons, dashes

MARK	USE	EXAMPLE
Colon	Introduces an explanation, list, or quote after a complete clause	"She had one aim: persuasion."
Semicolon	Joins closely related independent clauses	"The law passed; enforcement lagged."
Dash	Marks an interruption or emphatic add-on	"The vote was close, closer than anyone predicted."

Do not use a colon after a verb or preposition ("The speaker uses: repetition and contrast").

4.10 Titles, tense, and person

- **Literary present tense.** Write about texts in the present: "Banneker argues," not "Banneker argued."
- **Titles.** Italicize book titles (*Narrative*) and put essay or speech titles in quotation marks ("Letter from Birmingham Jail").
- **Person.** Use third person in FRQ 2; first person is acceptable in FRQ 3 when it serves the argument ("I mean...") but avoid "I think" repeated.

4.11 Concision and redundancy

WORDY	CONCISE
"the reason why"	"the reason"
"each and every"	"every"
"due to the fact that"	"because"

WORDY	CONCISE
"in order to"	"to" (use "in order to" for purpose clarity)
"at this point in time"	"now"
"is able to"	"can"
"a large number of"	"many"

Part 5: A Self-Edit Routine for the Last Five Minutes

MINUTE	TASK
1	Reread the thesis. Does it respond to every part of the prompt? Does it take a position or name choices?
2	Underline topic sentences. Do they build?
3	Spot-check three commentary passages: is there a "so what"?
4	Circle absolutes and "the audience." Replace with qualifiers and specific audiences.
5	Scan for comma splices, fragments, and pronoun problems. Neatly cross out; do not erase.

Part 6: Diagnose Your Own Essay

Use this table after a practice essay. Mark each box and write one rewritten sentence.

ERROR	PRESENT? (Y/N)	SENTENCE TO REWRITE	REWRITTEN
Summary			_____
"This shows that"			_____
Device list			_____
Prompt-echo thesis			_____
Absolute claim			_____
Generalization as context			_____
Source dumping			_____
Speech error			_____
Comma splice			_____

Part 7: Practice, Find and Fix

Rewrite each weak sentence. Model fixes are in the Answer Key.

1. "In the passage, the author says that the mills are bad and that children should not work there."
2. "Obama uses pathos to make the audience sad."
3. "This shows that the speaker really cares about her audience."
4. "Throughout history, people have always cared about freedom, so the claim is valid."
5. "Thesis: Jemison's claim is very true and I agree with it."
6. "Source A says that parks are good. Source B says that parks are expensive. Source C says that parks are popular."
7. "The author reaches out to readers by saying 'we all know.'" (for a speech)
8. "Fixing the schedule, the bus drivers were happy." (modifier)
9. "The speaker repeats words, she wants them to remember." (comma splice)
10. "Everyone knows that social media destroys attention."
11. "I will now explain how the speaker uses rhetorical devices to convey her message."
12. "The speaker is persuasive because she is very persuasive."

Rate each as one error type

Match each sentence to an error number from the checklist.

13. "Napping is good in some ways and bad in others."
14. "In today's world, everyone is stressed."
15. "The audience is moved."
16. "Source D proves that cities should regulate food trucks."

Answer Key

1. **Error 1 (summary)**. Sample fix: "The author portrays the mills as a theft of childhood by listing the hours children work, which makes legislators picture their own children in the same room."
2. **Error 3 (naming the appeal)**. Sample: "Obama describes the statue's small, ordinary details, which turns a monument into a neighbor and makes the audience feel the scale of Rosa Parks's courage."
3. **Error 2 (this shows)**. Sample: "By crediting each listener's own effort, the speaker turns advice into respect, which lets her demand more of them without sounding superior."
4. **Error 11 (sweeping generalization) and Error 10 (absolute)**. Sample: "The claim is valid for situations where fear of failure keeps people from trying, as when a first-time applicant withdraws before the deadline."
5. **Error 8 (weak thesis)**. Sample: "Jemison's claim is valid when 'limited imagination' means refusing to test an idea, but invalid when it dismisses evidence-based caution."
6. **Error 7 (source dumping)**. Sample: "Source A's praise for parks as green space is complicated by Source B's cost data; Source C's attendance figures suggest that popularity is the argument for paying."
7. **Error 16 (speech error)**. Sample: "The speaker draws her listeners in by saying 'we all know,' which turns a stranger on a stage into one of them."

8. **Modifier placement (4.5).** "After the schedule was fixed, the bus drivers were happy." (Or: "Fixing the schedule made the bus drivers happy.")
9. **Comma splice (4.1).** "The speaker repeats words because she wants her listeners to remember." (Or use a semicolon.)
10. **Error 10 (unqualified claim).** Sample: "Heavy use of social media can fragment attention, especially for tasks that require sustained focus."
11. **Filler/intro (Error 17 and the introduction advice).** Delete; open with context and a thesis naming choices.
12. **Circular reasoning/begging the question.** Sample: "The speaker is persuasive because she lets her audience reach the conclusion before she says it."
13. **Error 9** (vague thesis).
14. **Error 11** (sweeping generalization).
15. **Error 20** (vague audience reference) and Error 3.
16. **Error 10** (overstatement) and Error 7 (overreliance on one source). Better: "Source D suggests that cities can regulate food trucks without removing them, a point Source A qualifies."

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